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ABSTRACT

A reading program implemented in the Birmingham, Alabama, public schools in 1974 has produced increases in reading achievement in each of the years it has been used. Prior to 1974, the average Birmingham student's standardized reading test scores ranged from two months below the national average at the end of first grade to one year and nine months below the national average at the end of seventh grade; in 1979, the average achievement for each grade level was a full half year above the 1973-74 levels. The reading program that was developed involved the following components: (1) a widely publicized commitment to reading by the school system; (2) inservice teacher training; (3) reliance on a system based on the concept of mastery learning; (4) use of an eclectic instructional approach providing for variations in instructional materials and time tables according to individual children's needs; and (5) development of a continuum of reading skills, accompanied by pretests and posttests for each skill and by record keeping forms, to help teachers keep track of what each student has mastered. Evaluations of the program have indicated its successes and have pointed to areas in which improvement is needed. (GT)

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A Comprehensive Approach to Reading Improvement

by Roy D. Nichols, Jr.

In 1974, the public schools in Birmingham, Alabama began a process of improving the effectiveness of basic skills instruction and concomitantly upgrading student achievement test scores. The results of these efforts have been significant. Increases in achievement have been recorded at almost every grade level (1-8) in each of the succeeding six years.

Before the improvement effort began, standardized test scores indicated that the average child in the Birmingham City Schools ranged from two months below the national average at the end of first grade to one year and nine months below the national norm at the end of grade seven. Like most urban school systems, Birmingham achievement test scores had been well below the norm and students had a tendency to fall further and further behind their suburban counterparts with age. Our urban children apparently started out knowing less, and also tended to learn less each year than most suburban children. Many theories have been advanced for this nationally recognized urban phenomenon from a multitude of social variables to low teacher expectations. Whatever the cause of this downward trend in achievement, Birmingham's poor test scores were practically unaffected by programmatic efforts until the mid '70's. Since that time, dramatic achievement gains have been evidenced.

Birmingham is a city of roughly 300,000 people resting in a metropolitan area encompassing nearly 1,000,000. The Birmingham Public Schools serve slightly fewer than 50,000 students, 35% to 40% who come from low-income families and 75% of whom are black. Birmingham is an industrial city in the deep

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South which has begun to experience many of the problems generally associated with large urban school systems.

In 1973, the Birmingham Board of Education selected a new Superintendent, Wilmer S. Cody, to lead the school system. Together, the Superintendent and the Board of Education systematically began planning an attack on less than satisfactory student achievement. A modified Delphi technique was employed in soliciting staff and community suggestions for the goals of the self-improvement effort. Reading improvement was indicated to be the instructional goal of greatest importance. In 1974, the assault on poor reading performance began. By the end of the 1978-79 school year, Birmingham first graders had been on or above the national norm for four consecutive years and the least amount of growth shown at any grade level in reading achievement was two months, with the average increase in achievement for each grade level being a full half year above the 1973-74 level.

Making significant gains with new instructional programs generally does not occur through small changes to only one aspect of a program. A large scale comprehensive effort helped bring about the successes in Birmingham and although the main topic of this paper will describe the Birmingham reading program and its development, it would be unfair not to mention some of the other activities which were part of the over-all effort to upgrade the basic skills performance.

Since reading had been determined by Board and staff to be the skill most essential to life-success and had been declared to be the primary instructional objective, the school system's commitment immediately became evident in several ways. Programs and organizational structure changed to reflect this new objective. Priority statements were printed and made public. Board members and the Superintendent spoke of the school system's commitment in every available forum (radio, newspaper, television, school system publications, etc.) and, as the

effort to improve reading achievement gained momentum, more evidence of the System's comprehensive assault on illiteracy could be seen. Master teachers were hired to act as resources for general classroom instructors. $100,000 was budgeted for teacher retraining. A reading specialist from a local university was "borrowed" for eighteen months to serve as the directo. of in-service training. A drive to pass a property tax was initiated so that all of the school system's elementary schools might be accredited, thereby lowering class sizes and providing additional reading material through school libraries. The System's public relations tabloid reminded everyone of our new priorities in every issue. Student achievement test scores were published for all to see. Also, the summer school program began to emphasize training in reading instruction for teachers as well as remedial work for students. This tremendous flurry of activity served notice that the Birmingham City School System was serious about solving its reading problem.

Prior to the initiation of this drive to improve, the City schools tried to help students who were seriously behind through federally funded compensatory programs. A traditional "pull-out" instructional model was utilized where small groups of educationally needy students were removed from their regular classes for a period of 30 or 40 minutes per day to be given extra help in Reading. These supplemental reading programs were not closely related to the general classroom reading program in content or approach. Impact on the very significant reading problems experienced by Birmingham students was negligible.

The general classroom reading program, like many throughout the nation, was soley dependent upon the order and sequence of a nationally prominent Reading textbook with the quality of instruction determined to a very great extent by the minimal college and university training teachers had received. Naturally, because

many classrooms had excellent conscientious teachers, many students progressed quite well under the "old" program, but on a system-wide basis there was much to be desired.

1973-74 Birmingham City Standardized Achievement Test Results for Reading Expressed as Deviations from the National Norm for each Grade Level

Grade	Deviation from National Norm
1	-0.2
2	-0.5
3	-1.1
4	-1.1
5	-1.4
6	-1.6
7	-1.9
8	-1.5

In an effort to break the habit of accepting less than desirable achievement test scores, a comprehensive reading program had to be designed. We tried to consider the reading instructional needs of our students through all grade levels (1-12) and for all ability levels within each grade. We also felt that it was extremely important to eliminate learning gaps by developing a method which could coordinate our program both horizontally (from grade to grade) and vertically (between regular classroom teachers and remedial reading teachers.)

The system we eventually decided upon had its origins in Benjamin Bloom's mastery learning theory. Bloom's theory maintains that, "Most students can

attain a high level of learning capacity if instruction is approached sensitively and systematically, if students are helped when and where they have learning difficulties, if they are given sufficient time to achieve mastery, and if there is some clear criterion of what constitutes mastery."[1] What Dr. Bloom's theory "boils down" to is a belief that almost anyone can learn almost anything if given sufficient time and the proper experiences in the right sequence. Once Birmingham accepted this premise, we were able to reach only one conclusion: all children cannot be taught through the same materials, on the same schedule or in the same manner. We had to allow the teacher flexibility to personalize instruction as much as possible, varying materials and time tables for each child. Simultaneously, we had to help teachers systematize their teaching in order to safeguard against learning gaps.

To accomplish this, we organized a massive development effort involving literally hundreds of classroom teachers as well as supervisory personnel. It was decided to use an eclectic approach to reading instruction, since we were not so committed to one approach that we closed our minds to the advantages of other methods. A program was designed which had a strong phonetic basis, yet incorporated certain sight words and encouraged opportunities for students to express themselves through frequent written language experiences.

It must be pointed out that this is not unique. Most really good classroom teachers end up using similar eclectic approaches to the teaching of Reading. After many years of experimenting, they discard the ineffective methods and keep the activities which really work. The really good teachers also generally know what each of their students can and can't do. Such teachers have always

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1. Bloom, p.4

kept track of each child's progress throughout the year in rather specific terms; either mentally or through written records. The unique feature of the program being designed by the Birmingham teachers was that it would provide all teachers with the tools to do what only the better more experienced teachers had been able to do previously. The tool developed to help teachers accomplish this feat was referred to as a continuum of skills in reading.

The continuum of skills provided a hierachical listing of reading skills (simple to more complex) which incorporated basic sight words, phonetic decoding skills and comprehension skills. The continuum was accompanied by easy to administer pre-tests and post-tests for each skill and record keeping forms for easy teacher reference.

The notion of using a listing of skills to help teachers keep track of what each student had mastered was not unique either. In fact, other school systems and even commercial companies were producing skills lists which were accompanied by a whole battery of criterion referenced tests similar to ours. So why not just borrow or buy such a tool rather than go through the long arduous task of developing our own? We decided that some things are more efficiently developed on one's own while others should be purchased. There are certain instances when reinventing the wheel, as it were, is the best course to take.

By involving a great number of teachers in the development of the continuum, they became committed to seeing that the product of their labor worked. They developed a sense of excitement and what can only be referred to as a feeling of ownership for the continuum. They also learned how the system was to function and they became more than merely conversant with each reading skill on the list. Naturally, we didn't start entirely from "scratch." We looked at similar

products, but what we developed was uniquely the Birmingham Continuum of Skills. Our staff was proud of it, and the people who would ultimately be charged with its implementation were committed to its success. We feel that the process used in developing the continuum of skills can be credited with a great deal of the success our new reading program has experienced.

The skills list is broken down into a primary and an intermediate continuum for ease of handling. Each skill listed has two different tests to measure mastery. With the tests, a teacher can determine rather precisely what each child knows and doesn't know. The teacher can then efficiently establish groups of students who have similar learning needs, and after a suitable period of instruction, retest the students to determine if they have mastered the skill taught. Individual records of student progress are maintained, and through the use of these records, the reading program for any particular child can be coordinated through successive grade levels by simply passing the record of student skill mastery on to the next grade. Each student's reading program can also be coordinated between regular classroom teacher and remedial teacher through referral to the student records during joint planning and cooperative instructional efforts. Each of the child's reading teachers will see at a glance what the student knows and which skill the student is currently trying to master.

While it is true that the continuum was the basis of our new program, the continuum alone did not bring about the instructional improvements and resulting increases in student achievement. Only a comprehensive effort can affect change in a large organization. Many of the specific activities in which Birmingham engaged were mentioned earlier. Individually, probably none of the activities in which we engaged could have had any significant long lasting effect. When

woven into a comprehensive plan, however the effort stood a very good chance of success. Displayed below are improvements in "Total Reading" test results.

1978-79 Birmingham City California Achievement Performance for Reading Expressed as Deviations from the National Norm for each Grade Level

Grade	Deviation from National Norm	Change 1974-1979
1	-0.0	+ .2
2	-0.2	+ .3
3	-0.4	+ .7
4	-0.7	+ .4
5	-1.0	+ .4
6	-1.1	+ .5
7	-1.1	+ .8
8	-0.8	+ .7

Birmingham is proud of the results of its efforts, for increases of the magnitude shown above are quite significant when accomplished with a sample size of more than 30,000 elementary school students. We are proud, but we are not satisfied. Evaluations of our program have led us to believe that the program can become even more successful. An outside educational evaluation firm has recently concluded that—

- -all groups surveyed overwhelmingly perceive the continuum as a framework for reading instruction,
- -all groups surveyed overwhelmingly found the contiuum to be a good diagnostic tool for defining an individual student's strengths or weaknesses for instructional purposes,
- -principals have not been adequately trained in the diagnostic prescriptive approach,

-there is still considerable room for improvement in terms of teachers assigning learning tasks on the basis of diagnostic test results,

-only 60% of the general classroom teachers are really implementing or using the continuum approach as it was designed, and

-what is required at this point is refinement and elaboration.

We are now engaged in another round of long range planning sessions aimed at consolidating our gains and directing efforts toward those areas which need to be improved. Although our mission is not yet complete, significant progress has been made and many lessons which are transferrable to other school systems have been learned.

To summarize, Birmingham achieved a great deal of success through utilizing the following strategies, many of which will contribute to a successful reading improvement effort anywhere.

Birmingham—

1. put Reading in the "spotlight" by announcing its intention to make reading instruction a priority,
2. told teachers in writing the specific skills which were felt to be most essential,
3. trained teachers to teach those essential skills,
4. involved teachers in the actual development of our reading system,
5. encouraged teachers to continue to learn and to develop instructional materials which would complement the continuum,
6. required local schools to establish student achievement goals and strategies for accomplishing those goals,
7. asked regular classroom teachers and remedial teachers to work cooperatively,
8. monitored our progress toward our goal and evaluated our program objectively, and
9. tried never to forget that the purpose of our efforts was to help children.

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